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SOVIET UNION

A Not So Grand Old Party

The delegates range from hearty apparatchiks and stolid laborers to milkmaids and herdsmen in Asian dress. All 6,000 of them have descended upon Moscow for the Soviet Union's 26th Communist Party Congress this week. Despite the cheerily twinkling lights on the bridges over the Moscow River and the new stocks of oranges, lemons, cheese and meat on display in the stores, the congress has caught Moscow in a lean and hard time. Détente is in disrepair. Poland offers a bewildering challenge. Afghanistan has saddled the country with a costly and unpopular guerrilla war and a black-hat image in the Third World. The economy is the usual mess. And there is little sign that the Politburo intends to inject some new iron into its tired blood.

The dominant themes of the congress will be set by President Leonid Brezhnev, 74. Since late January the ailing leader has been staying at a rest home outside Moscow, gathering strength for the keynote address early this week. His personal prestige seems higher than ever. The top ranks of the party are full of his supporters. In recent appearances he has seemed somewhat stronger and more alert. But intelligence reports suggest that Brezhnev's energy and attention span may have dwindled to about two hours. He spoke to the delegates for six hours in 1971 and for five hours and ten minutes in 1976. This time Kremlinologists will scrutinize the length of Brezhnev's speech, as well as its substance, for clues to the old leader's health and future.

'Boots On': Brezhnev's sixteen-year stewardship of the party has brought political stability—at the price of considerable ossification. The average age of Politburo members is now 79. Infirmities afflict Mikhail Suslov, 78, the party's chief theoretician, Defense Minister Dmitri Ustinov, 72, and KGB chief Yuri Andropov. Even so, Brezhnev's fourteen-member Politburo is expected to award itself another five-year term in power. The 237-member Central Committee may be enlarged by about 10 per cent to draw in younger members. But the most likely candidate for promotion to the Politburo itself seems to be First Deputy Prime Minister Ivan Arkhipov, who is 73 years old. "Rejuvenating the leadership offers nothing that's good for the people," Sanitized Copy Approved for Release 2010/06/18 : CIA-RDP90-00552R000100740019-1

with their boots on. There's no place in this society for retired politicians."

The congress is likely to approve a five-year plan running through 1985 that will virtually assure economic stagnation and even harsher days for Soviet consumers. The plan contains the lowest Soviet growth targets since World War II: less than 4 per cent each year. American experts suspect that even those meager levels are unrealistically high. Key Soviet industries failed to meet the reduced goals of the last five-year plan. And the new plan's target for grain production will require five con-



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Brezhnev: A virtual guarantee of cheers for more of the same

secutive years of record or near-record harvests. An expected decline in Soviet oil production by 1985 could be offset by exports from a new natural-gas pipeline linking Siberia to West Germany. But the billions in Western investments that will be needed to bring the pipeline on-stream would be one of the first casualties if the Soviets chose to intervene in Poland.

Poland is probably safe for the duration of the congress itself. But many Soviet experts believe that the Kremlin will take the opportunity of the congress to hold some very tough private discussions with members of the Warsaw Pact. Among the visiting delegations and dignitaries will be Stanislaw Kania, Poland's party chief, who

Five years ago Brezhnev was able to tell the 25th congress about "a turn for the better" in relations between the Soviet Union and the United States; this time the delegates must face up to a turn for the worse. While the speeches undoubtedly will contain sulfurous blasts of propaganda, room will probably be left for better relations later on. The odds are that the speakers will criticize the Carter Administration for damaging détente by delaying the SALT II treaty and warn the Reagan Administration that the Soviet Union does not intend to negotiate any new treaty from weakness. But they will probably dangle the hope of future arms-control talks, along with trade and other confidence-building measures. If the enticements don't work, the Soviet people will be exhorted to stow away their expectations, tighten their belts and finance a new arms race.

Moscow's hardening military power and its softening economic position may make the Soviets more dangerous than ever in the 1980s, since the temptation to cover up domestic ills with foreign adventures is bound to grow. The irony is that the relentless Soviet military buildup may contribute to the very encirclement that the Soviets most fear. President Reagan has already called for more U.S. defense spending. The United States, Western Europe, Japan and China have drawn more closely together. France is thinking about developing its own neutron bomb, West Germany about accepting U.S. cruise missiles aimed at the Soviet Union.

Blandishments: The example of Afghanistan and the Soviet use of Vietnamese surrogates in Cambodia and Cubans in Africa have also offended many nonaligned and developing nations. To counter these developments, the party congress will probably exclude blandishments for the Third World—while calling for even more weaponry.

Brezhnev will undoubtedly step down from the podium pleased with the results of his years in power. The 25th anniversary of Nikita Khrushchev's 1956 speech to the Twentieth Party Congress denouncing the crimes of Joseph Stalin will fall during the current congress. Of the party barons elected in 1956, only Brezhnev and Suslov survive. Brezhnev has now outlasted Nikolai Podgorny and Aleksei Kosygin, the other two members of the troika that succeeded Khrushchev in 1964. His protégés run the Soviet Union. They will fill the marble and glass Palace of Congresses. And they will undoubtedly cheer what he offers as his legacy—more of the same.